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Old Soldiers of The Underground

The Wit and Valor of Jacques Chaban-Delmas

By Henry Mitchell

Jacques Chaban-Delmas was in his early 20s when France fell to the forces of Hitler, but this was "horrible, abominable" and he, for one, did not agree to the defeat of France.

"Like many young Frenchmen, I simply did not accept it."

But he did not want to be in Paris, a Paris not free, so he took his wife and their 6-month-old baby to Nice where they lived in a pension.

Some fellow on the other side of the thin walls had a radio that blared forth at night, waking the baby, so Chaban-Delmas went over to give him hell for the noise.

But he wound up listening. For on the radio were Charles de Gaulle's broadcasts from London, calling for a free France and for resistance.

Chaban-Delmas was on fire to go to London and get his orders and do his bit. Life, as usual, did not work out quite that way. He did meet a colonel of the new resistance movement, and was ordered to Paris.

"First I was a spy, then a terrorist, then handled liaison missions with the Allies," and at the last had the honor of entering a liberated Paris with Gen. Leclerc.

He had settled (as much, one suspected, as a man of his animal vigor ever settles) on a sofa at the French Embassy, an hour or so before his appearance as the annual banquet given by old boys of the OSS—the Office of Strategic Services, the nation's wartime intelligence-undercover agency which preceded the Central Intelligence Agency.

The OSS veterans presented him with their highest honor, the William J. Donovan Award.

He was in a business suit, and had to change to evening clothes. Moreover, he proposed to translate his acceptance speech into English—"I must make the effort," he said—and how this was to be done in 90 minutes, nobody knew.

But not to worry. He settled back and told marvelous anecdotes. Incredibly enough, he was in the receiving line at the Washington Hilton an hour later, with his speech in English (thanks to his wife's help).

But yes, of course he had scraps in his Resistance career. Once the Germans arrested him. He produced a forged document purporting to show he was "an inspector of finance."

The Germans held him that night, but Chaban-Delmas put on such a show of outrage—he even had them telephone the Vichy government—and bluffed and thundered so successfully that the German officer apologized and sent him in his own car the next day to catch a train.

He was grateful, he said, that his comrades in the Resistance did not pick that day or that German officer's car to bomb.

As he got on the train, two German soldiers came to attention and, in short, he got a splendid send-off from his erstwhile captors.

Of course, he went on, he got some very fishy looks from the French passengers on the train and made it a point to sit at the very back.

A moral here—some of the seemingly contemptible people you used to meet during the war were probably heroes.

Then there was the case of "Gen. deGaulle's house." After a time, Chaban-Delmas sent his family to live with his foster father in the Dordogne area of France, but one day the German came to blow the place up.

"This is De Gaulle's house," said the methodical German with the dynamite.

"It is not. It is my house, the Legendre house," said Chaban-Delmas' father. He took the German inside and showed him a German flag, which the German saluted. The father did not bother to mention it was a war trophy from World War I.

Nimble in wit like his son, the man saved his house.

It turned out later the house had once been owned by Charles de Gaulle's father, and the French hero spent many a summer vacation there in his youth.

Chaban-Delmas has the image (and the body) of a sportsman. He says terrible things about smoking. He runs a lot—jogged long before the American fashion for it. He is great at tennis. He actually leaped up an embassy staircase two steps at a time. One hears of this, but rarely sees it.

His career in French politics has been checkered. He was a protege of De Gaulle. He was prime minister under Georges Pompidou (and fired by him). He was a brigadier general at 29. He has been mayor of Bordeaux ever since 1947, and never mind his state duties, they keep electing him.

He is now president of the National Assembly. He could, if he wished, tell many a tale of political intrigue and in-fighting.

But he was honored by the veterans of OSS not because of his political offices but because he epitomizes (they pointed out) the man who is personally brave, with a sense of honor, and has risked everything in time of war for his country.

He follows other earlier recipients of the Donovan Award such as Allen Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower, Lord Mountbatten, Lt. Gen. William Quinn, etc.

It was clear at the party that many of the 450 who were packed in (many had to be turned away, who had not made advance reservations) had come not to swap old stories so much as to touch base.

For some of them, their years with OSS were their main touch with great events and world history.

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Many of the men only knew a couple of other OSS men during the war years, since it was not a service in which you met a lot of dandy new friends.

Sidney Harrow of Philadelphia, "a manufacturer's representative, sir—in a word, a salesman," had given and interpreted personality tests at the time OSS men were recruited. He recognized some he had tested. He lied unconvincingly but gallantly:

"You look exactly as you did all those years ago."

He applauded the dignitaries, the speeches of Sen. Daniel Inouye and former ambassador to France Kenneth Rush.

He looked down at a glass littered with tiny onions, the remnants of a few celebratory drinks, and said he thought he might retire for the evening while he still had his faculties.

But once he leaned over to a reporter and said:

"God, who would believe it. Look at that old bastard on your right. Or that one there. Or that one across from you. Any of them.

"They couldn't lift a 30-pound bar if their lives depended on it. What the years have done to men. But these are heroes, the heroes of American civilization."

He was moved—one is often moved by the truth—and said a ceremonious farewell to the table guests, and retired to bed.

From left, Francois de Laboulaye, Geoffrey Jones and Jacques Chaban-Delmas, by Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post